



Healing 2: Jesus and Healing in John's Gospel

By Craig Millward

"Words mean what I want them to mean" said Humpty Dumpty in Alice in Wonderland. The same could be said, it seems, of the way people understood Jesus' miracles. Just after John records Jesus' first run-in with the authorities he tells us that 'while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name' (John 2:23). In the following chapter we are told that Nicodemus' secret visit to Jesus began with the confession, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him" (John 3:1). John then tells us that a whole Samaritan village believes in Jesus following the woman's testimony of his prophetic ability and that he finds a similar welcome across Galilee for 'they had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival'.

Yet, 'Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person' (John 2:24-25). The first indication that Jesus is aware of the ambiguity of his miracles occurs in Cana, the town that had witnessed the turning of water into wine: "Unless you people see signs and wonders," Jesus told [the government official who asked him to heal his son], "you will never believe" (John 4:48). Although, in the NIV version of the text, it may seem that Jesus is expressing little more than mild frustration, the official takes Jesus' words to be a rebuke. Textual critics tell us that the form of words chosen by John is a traditional Hebrew expression which makes little sense when posed as a question as the NIV does. The official's son is healed and the whole household believes, but Jesus' deeper misgivings are clear.

In the chapters that follow, Jesus continues to meet needs (John 5:1-15; 6:10-13), crowds follow him as a consequence (John 6:1-2), and many people believe (John 6:14). He even points Jewish leaders to the signs as evidence of his credentials (John 5:36). Yet it was the argument about the self-centredness of those seeking miracles that led to Jesus' insistence that those who considered themselves true followers should "feed on me" and "live because of me" (John 6:57). This seems to be a watershed moment in the Gospel. Following this showdown John tells us that Jesus holes himself up in Galilee to the degree that his brothers taunt him: "Leave Galilee and go to Judea, so that your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world" (John 7:3-4).

Jesus knew that, despite being exposed to his miracles and his teaching, even his own brothers didn't have the faith that was required to be a disciple (John 7:5). Onlookers continued to accept that he may be the Messiah but this judgement was merely based upon the subjective opinion that there were no greater miracles possible than the ones they had witnessed. I conclude that a faith based on miracles may

be as commendable as it is understandable (John 14:11) but is also incomplete unless it also calls people to follow as a disciple (John 2:23). As Jesus said to Thomas, admittedly in a different context: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

Discussion Questions

- The church is divided in many ways over the question of healing. Three examples: a) The bible does not describe actual miracles but recounts stories that have grown taller in the telling. b) Signs like healing were once made available to Jesus and the early church, maybe they have ceased now that the scriptures are complete. c) God heals people today just as he has always done. In what ways have you wrestled with this question?
- Jesus seemed to struggle with the attitudes of those who wanted to follow him. In what ways can you sympathise with him?
- How is the faith produced by witnessing something you cannot explain incomplete?